

## lost and found by keep-swinging

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**Summary:** El loses Mike too. / Takes place directly after El defeats the Mind Flayer once and for all. angst, hurt/comfort, friendship, family feels, some romance, and some angsty reunions.

## lost and found

~Author's Note~

Hey guys! So I actually wrote this probably a week or two after watching season three, and I just finally got around to editing this and posting it. I'm hoping I'm still one of the first stories out there with this kind of idea (if there's any at all? I don't know I don't think I've found any yet lol) but anyway I've only made one other dive into the Stranger Things fandom, and I don't particularly like that first story I wrote, so hopefully this one is significantly better!

I don't want to give too much away plot-wise so enjoy the story and reviews would make my night!

(Sorry in advance about all the dots, ffnet isn't as generous as ao3 with spacing!)

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lost and found

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Max is sobbing in her arms, and all she can think about is Mike.

She readjusts her arm and tightens her grip on Max as her sobs grow louder, and as she looks back towards the store Max had emerged from, she keeps expecting him to be there, calling out her name before running to her and wrapping her in a tight embrace that she'll never want to leave. But as time continues on, as the seconds tick by, as the military floods the building and clears every single room with their big guns and pale faces, he doesn't run to her, and soon Lucas is gathering Max in his arms instead of her own, and Nancy has a hand on her shoulder asking, "Where's Mike?"

And for some reason, all El can do is shake her head and say, "I don't know."

There's a bad feeling in her gut, like all her insides are knotted and twisted, because she knows, she already knows something isn't right, Mike shouldn't be missing, he should be with Max, but she can't question Max because Max can't even talk, and El's breathing is picking up because *Mike should be here* but he's not and now her vision is blurry with tears and hasn't she been through enough pain—

"El."

It's Jonathan who speaks, his hand holding tight to her left wrist, and she reaches up her other hand to wipe at her eyes so that she can see his face. "Are you okay?"

She wants to say no, wants to say that she'd give anything be snuggled up with Hopper on their living room couch watching Miami Vice right now, but she also wants to find Mike. So instead she nods her head.

"Mike," she mumbles, looking to Nancy. "We have to find Mike."

His sister nods and El can physically feel the worry emitting from her in waves. She tries to hide it behind her determination, but when El glances at Jonathan out of the corner of her eye, she knows he can sense it too. "Do you remember where he was last? Could you take us there?"

The knot in El's stomach grows tighter, like her subconscious is telling her not to bother; like she already knows the answer, yet refuses to acknowledge it. Nancy's thumb is rubbing a pattern against her shoulder as she meets El's worried eyes, "We'll be right with you the whole time."

"Yeah," Jonathan echoes and though their words don't make her feel as safe as Mike's would, they're something, and right now El will take something over nothing.

"Okay." She finally says, her words reflecting her exhaustion.

They both help her stand and then Jonathan tells her to lean on him

as they walk, hooking an arm around her. Nancy stays glued to her other side just in case. Slowly, because her head still aches and her leg still burns, El guides them back to the room where Billy had attacked them. Flashes of what had happened replay in El's memory—Max hitting the ground with a loud thump, Mike slamming into the pipe and then going so, so still—the memories send a shiver down her spine and at the same time the pain in her stomach grows worse.

Nancy grabs her hand as they reach the ajar doorway, and El hears her shaky exhale before all three of them turn into the room together.

There's blood smeared against the steam pipes off to the right and splotches dotted across the porcelain floor. A fairly large pool of blood sits just below where the pipes are resting against the wall, and the smell of copper is heavy in the room.

Mike is nowhere to be found.

Nancy's breath hitches when she first sees the blood, and then she's calling for him, calling so loudly that his name bounces off the walls and down the hallway with no response. Jonathan's at Nancy's side as soon as the tears come, and she's clutching the cloth of his shirt like El would with Mike, and she's crying softly into his shoulder like El would with Mike after a nightmare during one of the Party's sleepovers, and she's crying for Mike just like El would during those three hundred and fifty-three days and it's all too much.

El's stomach lurches suddenly when she glances back at the pool of blood for the third time and it's not the sight that's gruesome but the thought, and she barely has time to fall to her knees before she gets sick. Her head pounds and her stomach rolls as the reality slams into her full force—he's gone, Mike's gone—and it's Jonathan rubbing her back and not Mike, it's Nancy whispering soft reassurances to her as she cries and heaves and not Mike, it's two people who aren't Mike and will never be Mike who are there with her as she breaks, and all she wants is *him*.

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El knew something was wrong as soon as Mike wasn't the first one to run to her after the Mind Flayer had fallen. He was always the first one there when it came to her.

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When El learns that she's lost Hopper too, when she learns that she's lost not only Mike but her dad too, she's not quite sure how she's supposed to live and flourish and grow if the two people who were her everything aren't there to see it happen.

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There's a soft knock on El's doorframe as she's looking through one of the Wonder Woman comic books Max had lent her. She glances up and sees Joyce standing there wringing her hands with a small smile, and she gestures towards the bed when El meets her eyes.

"Hey. Can I sit?" El nods and dog-ears the page she's on, closing the comic and setting it aside as Joyce takes a seat next to her. The bed creaks with the added weight. "I was just coming in to tell you that dinner's finally ready."

She shakes her head, barely able to hold back a laugh. "I've had this stove for nearly twenty years and I still forget that if I look away for one second everything will end up charred to a crisp."

El smiles, the skin around her eyes crinkling, and Joyce wishes her face would light up like that every day. Joyce's smile thins as she places a gentle hand on El's knee. Her eyes trace the stitches still embedded in El's skin, and the crude sewing job the hospital had done after the rush of intoxicated people the holiday had brought in.

The line of stitches is slightly crooked even though the remains of the bite had been mostly straight, and Joyce had cleaned it the best she could after. The stitches were pulled so tautly that every slight bit of pressure by the injury had El grimacing. (Though that pain was nothing compared to the pain that was still latched to her heart, lingering and building and never quite going away.)

Distantly, El can hear the clink of silverware as Jonathan and Will converse, their voices carrying over the quiet hum of the television in the living room. A glance at the clock beside her bed tells her that it's nearing seven-one-seven. Dinner smells amazing as it always does, burnt or not.

"How's your leg?" Joyce's voice is soft, caring.

El shrugs. "Not bad," she says, her voice quiet.

Joyce looks up at her, her fingers a soft weight against the usual numbness of her knee. "It already looks better. The stitches will have to stay in for probably another week or so, and then we'll have to go back to the doctors so they can remove them."

El's face scrunches up, "Does that hurt?"

Joyce shakes her head, "Oh no honey, not at all. You'll be okay. Promise."

The word slips out easily, without much thought, and echoes of different promises all belonging to a different voice bounce through El's head before Joyce can apologize. El doesn't even realize that she's crying until Joyce's hands are on her face wiping away the tears, and then she's bringing her close, El's head falling into her shoulder, one hand buried in her hair, the other rubbing up and down her back.

El doesn't know how long she cries for.

Joyce just holds her, her touch holding the same amount of comfort Hopper's touch did—she even thinks she sees Jonathan and Will appear in the doorway and then disappear just as fast at one point, Jonathan's face scribbled with worry and Will's with some type of understanding—but eventually she's able to breathe through her nose again, and her sobs reduce to soft sniffles.

Joyce runs her hand through El's hair in a soothing motion, and though El knows that Terry Ives is her *Mama*, officially, she thinks Joyce Byers could be her mother, unofficially. Because there's something Joyce can always provide that Mama can't, and that's comfort and *love*, and safe arms to fall into when the darkness closes

in.

They sit in silence for a while, Joyce quiet but comforting, El sniffing and smearing tears across her cheeks every time she lifts her hand to wipe the new ones away. Joyce doesn't let go of her once, not even when Jonathan knocks softly on the doorframe and whispers, "Mom?"

He startles them both and offers an apologetic smile as he walks closer and hands over a brand new box of tissues. "Thank you," Joyce says as Jonathan carries the small trashcan over from the corner, and he nods, meeting El's eyes.

"Will and I are going to watch Ghostbusters in the living room whenever you guys are—"

"No, no start it without us," Joyce interjects, as she spares a glance at El, whose carefully wiping at her eyes and nose with one of the tissues she had passed to her. "We'll be out when we're ready."

Jonathan lingers in the doorway. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. Now go start the movie, you know it's one of Will's favorites, stop making him wait." Her smile is bright and there's laughter in her voice, and it's enough to reassure Jonathan as he nods and walks back to the living room, pushing the tape into the player and then hitting play before taking his seat next to Will on the couch.

Will looks over at his brother, his mind a whirlwind, his concern for El readable on his face. "Are they okay?" Jonathan reaches for the remote to turn up the opening intro and gently nudges Will's shoulder with his own.

"They're okay, they'll be out soon."

Will drums his fingers against his leg, "Is El okay?"

Jonathan lowers the volume. "It's only—it's only been five days. El's still grieving and Mom is too. We all are. She—"

His voice catches, and Will's fingers still.

"I know El's gonna be okay. I just don't know how long it will be until

she is, and we're just going to have to be there for her in the meantime. The same goes for Mom."

Will's still fidgeting, a nervous habit he picked up after the Upside Down. It only happens when he's distraught about something or unsure in the environment he's in. Right now Jonathan knows it's the former as he turns fully towards his brother, one of his hands resting over his bobbing leg.

"Hey," he says, encouraging, and Will squeezes his eyes shut, to hide from the world or his emotions, he's not sure.

"I know that El lost Hopper and Mike but we lost them too." He opens his eyes; his leg stops shaking. "The Party lost Mike too."

No one was faring well after the Battle at Starcourt.

After discovering that Mike was gone—no trace, no body, just blood and a feeling of loss—Nancy had held El as Jonathan went to find someone, anyone. He had stumbled upon Doctor Owens, and after filling him in, he had ordered a search of everything in a twenty-mile radius. And as the military swept Hawkins for Mike Wheeler, everyone else was escorted to ambulances in shaky pairs of two.

Robin and Steve were poked and prodded at by a stubby man with an even stubbier beard who was adamant to insist that they would be fine in a couple of hours, while Nancy and Jonathan huddled together under a blanket after being deemed physically okay by two younger paramedics.

Erica, though she usually despised her brother, was pressed in between him and Max, and feeling safer than she had in the last twenty-four hours with his arm slung around her shoulders and Max's hand pressing against her back.

Max was silent, numb even, as she stared blankly ahead, and their paramedic had said that she would have some lasting trauma but nothing too serious, and Lucas nearly jumped up and punched him, but Max was still holding his hand tight, and he didn't want to let go of her, so he had settled on stewing silently until Erica had said, "If you tell anyone about this nerd, you're dead," before laying her head



on his shoulder, her words falling short, because they were all almost dead mere minutes before.

Dustin, El, and Will were mushed together in the middle ambulance, an older paramedic with a mustache bandaging the wound on El's head while a younger paramedic with nearly no hair wrapped white bandages around and around her leg and had said, "This'll sting, but it'll hold until you get to the hospital."

El had rested her head on Dustin's shoulder as he whisper-sung Neverending Story to her in an attempt to help her get her mind off of everything that had happened, and how Mike was missing, while Will had held her hand tightly in his own, two blankets tossed over his still-trembling body.

Doctor Owens oversaw everyone, double-checking with paramedics and their written statements before moving onto the next, and then Joyce and Murray had appeared in the middle of the parking lot, dressed in tan and red.

Will had immediately ran to his mom as soon as he had seen her, and El had stood, expecting her dad. Then Joyce had met her eyes, and El's world, her tiny world where home was the people she surrounded herself with, had splintered.

Nancy and Dustin were the ones who went to El as she fell to the asphalt with a hoarse scream, her heart fractured, and Dustin had caught her under the arms before she could collapse completely, Nancy steadfast at his side. "It's okay," they had both said, "it's okay, everything is going to be okay," but things didn't get okay. Even as Joyce told Doctor Owens that she was taking custody of her (whatever that word meant, because El knew *adoption* and *paperwork* and *dad*, but custody sounded more threatening, more definite, it sounded scarier and *final*) but then Joyce had grabbed her hand before climbing into the ambulance with her, and El had forgotten that scary word just as fast as she had learned it.

Families were called while Joyce and El had gone to the hospital.

El didn't like the hospital; it reminded her too much of the Lab, but after she had looked just a little too scared at one of the doctors

Joyce had stayed glued to her side, her hand pressed in hers.

Stitches had hurt, but it was over fast like Joyce had promised, and then Jonathan, Steve, Robin, and Nancy were there with the rest of the Party in the waiting room. The Party had bombarded El in a massive group hug as soon as they could reach her, Dustin squeezing tight, Max's head pressed to El's shoulder, Lucas strong and steady at El's other side, Will stretching his arms as far as they would go, their Party missing a plus one, but there in one piece.

Joyce's phone had rung as the kids were talking among themselves and she had excused herself, leaving the kids under everyone else's care for just a minute.

Jonathan and Nancy leaned on one another as they watched the Party with soft smiles while Steve readjusted so Robin could swing her legs across his lap because the waiting room chairs were *so damn uncomfortable*, and then Joyce had returned to the room and her face was white.

She looked crestfallen, Will would tell her later, and even after explaining the word twice to El, she still didn't believe it because she didn't think any word could express that emotion that was present in Joyce's face at the moment.

Mike was gone.

Doctor Owens couldn't find him, and neither could the military.

Doctor Owens said that he assumed him dead because of the Mind Flayer and how things had lined up, with the information that El, Mike, and Max were all knocked out at the time, that Billy could've turned him into another Flayed, or the Mind Flayer could've killed him outright because it knew the connection El had shared with him, but nothing was sure besides the blood that was left where Mike's body should've been.

The Party was down a member.

Their town was down a police chief.

Nothing seemed right anymore.

"I miss him," El murmurs against Joyce's flannel, a mountain of tissues now overflowing from the trashcan beside them, "I miss him so much." Joyce knows that subconsciously she's talking about the both of them, but that the words coming out of her mouth are for Mike.

"I know you do honey, I know."

El's voice is hoarse, "It's unfair," she whispers, "we weren't supposed to—"

She pauses, struggling to find the right words, "*lose* each other again."

"I know honey." Joyce offers quietly, gently rocking her small body back and forth. Even though El grew plenty through proper meals and recognized birthdays, she was still tiny for her age. Joyce figured it was something that came from her mother, or the experiments she was born out of, or the experiments she would never recover from.

"Three hundred and fifty-three days wasn't enough?" Her words are angry now and growing in volume and Joyce knows all too well that the anger isn't directed at her. "When will enough be . . . enough?"

Joyce exhales, and it's slightly shaky. She knows what loss is. El's barely grasped the meaning of grief, and how to deal with it. Joyce pulls back slightly, and El lifts her head, her red-rimmed eyes meeting with Joyce's. There's an emotion in Joyce's eyes that El can't put a word to. Exhaustion? Hurt? Grief?

(Grief is still new to her, as a word and as an emotion.

El doesn't like grief.)

Joyce pulls her arms back so that her hands cover each other as they rest in her lap. Her eyes flicker to Sarah's bracelet pulled tight around El's wrist, hiding her number in a bright ring of sky blue. El wonders if she finds the same comfort in Sarah's bracelet as she does.

"El honey," Joyce starts slow, and El thinks about how she really likes being called honey by Joyce, because Hop had taught her the saying sweet as honey a few months ago, and El's never forgotten it because she liked it so much.

(She remembers calling Mike that in the middle of May, her fingers brushing against millions and millions of sunflower petals in the field that's so barren today because of the July heatwave. They had decided to take a walk through the flowers that morning, and they had made it to the field by that afternoon.

Before Mike had found out that he was allergic to such a gigantic gathering of sunflowers, El had turned to him, hand in hand, and had said his name.

"Yeah?" He had said, pulling his gaze away from the bright yellows that were surrounding them and instead focusing all of his attention on El.

"You're—I'm—"

She had stumbled over her words at first, in a rush of excitement and nerves, and he had tugged gently on her hand, saying, "Slow down El, take your time," and then the excitement had caused the words to burst out of her.

"Mike, you're as sweet as honey," and she knew he wouldn't be as excited as her about the phrase, no one ever was when she found a phrase or word that she really liked, but he always tried his best to be supportive.

She wasn't expecting him to, however, chuckle almost in disbelief, before a wide, genuine smile had stretched across his lips. "You really think so?" He had responded, his voice almost a whisper, and El had giggled and tugged at his hand.

"Yes, I do," and he had smiled some more before pulling her to him with so much force it had knocked them both over, the two a tangle of limbs and laughs as Mike caught her around the waist so she wouldn't fall anywhere else but on him, and then he was saying how she was the sweetest honey around, and anxious with initiating a kiss she had done so for him, the two finding a new delight in kissing in between the sunflowers.

It didn't take long for Mike's unknown sunflower allergy to act up though, and their day was cut short by a visit to the doctor after his

cheeks had swelled up to the size of small balloons.

He told her after he was better that he wouldn't have traded that day for anything else in the whole world.)

"I miss Hop." Joyce exhales again, breaking El of the memory. "I miss Hop a lot."

Her hands fumble over one another in her lap and El's opposite thumb hooks around Sarah's bracelet. "Losing someone is hard, and sometimes it feels like it's never gonna get better, and that you're going to be sad forever and ever."

El can see that Joyce's eyes are watery now, and she wonders if she's thinking of Bob Newby the Superhero. Mike had told her about him one cold night in, their feet tangled together as they watched *The Golden Girls* (to Mike's extreme displeasure, but he knew the show had made El happy so he never said no) rain pouring from the sky outside.

He had explained that Bob had saved them from the demodogs and El didn't need any more explanation besides that; she had just snuggled closer to him as they weathered the storm in his dimly-lit basement, Blanche's quips making Mike laugh more than they should've.

"But you're not going to be sad forever. Just in the beginning. Grief is tricky, and not everyone deals with it in the same way. Some people might scream, others might cry, and some don't do anything at all. But the most important thing that you understand honey is that you're not alone in this."

As she says it, she reaches out and takes one of El's hands in hers. "We're all grieving together, and it's hard, and it's painful, but we're all feeling just as upset and just as angry as you. It's going to get better, someday soon, but first, we have to get through the hard part."

El hands Joyce a tissue, which she takes gratefully with a half-smile.

As she wipes at her eyes El asks, "What's the hard part?"

Joyce wipes quickly at her nose before tossing the tissue into the

trashcan.

"The hard part is moving on. The hard part is remembering who they are without getting upset. The hard part is the funerals and the families and picking out flowers. But after that hard part passes, that's when everything is going to get better and be okay. El," she squeezes her hand, "you just need to remember that we're all here for you. Every single one of us, through the hard parts and the parts that aren't as hard. Never forget that."

El shakes her head, her own eyes wet but her cheeks dry. "I won't."

Joyce grabs another tissue and blows her nose, and then there's a smirk spreading across her face. Her and Hopper's smirks are so similar it's almost dizzying to El, but she doesn't mind. That shared smirk usually means there's something good-yet-bad on the other end of it.

"You know," Joyce starts slowly, "Hop told me about a favorite dessert of yours, and how to make it—something called a triple-decker Eggo extravaganza-something?"

El's eyes shine as she corrects her. "Extravaganza." She says the word with no trouble, adding, "He always said it was too many calories."

Joyce stands from the bed and reaches her hands out, El grabbing onto both as Joyce pulls her up with an exaggerated groan. El laughs as Joyce reaches an arm around her shoulders and hugs her to her side as they leave the room together, beaming smiles on both of their faces. "I think we can afford eight thousand calories for one night."

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Joyce makes the triple-decker Eggo extravaganza perfectly, even down to the last candy.

She even tells El to add as much whipped cream as she likes.

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When they finally make it to the living room, Joyce tells her boys to scoot and they make room for the girls on the couch. El ends up next to Will, and he says nothing, only reaches for her hand and holds tight.

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El doesn't understand why funerals have so much black.

Why not remember the person lost in colorful blues and greens and yellows?

Why only black?

It's almost the middle of July, and Jim Hopper's funeral is today at three o'clock. Mike Wheeler hasn't had a funeral yet, and El's not sure that Karen is going to. In her words, her son is only missing, not dead, and El doesn't have the heart to tell her that he's gone, really gone, and how she can sense that even without her powers.

El's finishing putting her hair up in Max's bright green scrunchie (because if no one else is going to wear color to her dad's funeral then she is) when no other than Karen Wheeler walks into the funeral home parlor, guiding Holly by the hand.

"Oh, El! Just the girl I was looking for." El turns around from the mirror and offers a small smile as Karen approaches her, though she's confused about why Karen would be looking for her. She glances down at Holly at the same time the younger girl looks up at her, and El offers a wave, which Holly giggles at before smiling and waving back, hiding half her body behind her mom's leg. El's smile widens, and she thinks she misses Holly, misses the Wheelers' house.

El didn't have very many interactions with Holly, but one time Karen had to run out and Ted was working late, and the little girl had clambered down the basement steps, interrupting one last kiss as his mom had hollered, "Michael! Watch your sister! I'll be back in ten minutes and no funny business!"

Mike had groaned loudly before shouting back, "Okay! Fine!"

And then they were left alone.

Holly had hesitated on the last step, her small arms wrapped around a stuffed tiger that was bigger than her. Mike had walked over to get her and Holly stared at El all the way to the couch.

El and Holly had seen each other in passing before, but they had never truly interacted yet, so Holly was a little weary as Mike had edged her towards the empty seat on the couch next to her. "It's okay," he had said as she had taken her seat, El trying her best to smile in what she hoped was a friendly way, "remember El? She's my girlfriend and she's super badass—"

"Mike," El had scolded softly from her spot, and Mike had shaken his head.

"Shit yeah, don't tell Mom I cursed but anyways, El is super amazing. She's got superpowers you know and—"

El liked how Mike turned into a completely different person whenever it came to his younger sister. His voice would calm if he was hyper, and go low, reassuring, safe—and if he had to watch her for any amount of time, he wouldn't take his eyes off of her. El knew Mike didn't tell Holly a lot, so she was surprised to hear him tell Holly that she had superpowers and that one time she flipped a van full of bad men over their heads.

Towards the end of his storytelling, she had gently gripped at Mike's arm (as halfway through he had taken a seat on the floor in front of the couch) and he had turned towards her, his mouth quirked at the corner. "You okay, El?" She had nodded, but he wasn't blind to the apprehension in her eyes.

"Are you sure?" She had whispered, Holly watching their faces curiously. "About telling her about . . . me?" Mike had grinned, and there was so much certainty in his eyes that El had felt all of her own worries melt away.

"Yeah, I am. Holly and I share secrets all the time, don't we Holly?" And the little girl had looked from Mike to El, the latter's hand still gripping tight to Mike's upper arm, her brother telling her tales her



mother would read in books that he swears actually happened, and something told her that this was special, and always meant to be kept a secret.

She had held out her stuffed tiger to El, who took it with a set of furrowed eyebrows, before saying, "Tiger and I love Mike's stories."

Then Holly had moved closer to El, and Mike had continued the story, and by the time Karen returned home and rushed down the steps to check on the kids, they were all sharing popcorn and watching one of Holly's favorite movies. El was laying halfway into Mike's side, Holly snuggled into El's side, with Tiger nestled on top of them, Mike leaning all of his weight against the armrest. Karen had ducked back upstairs before the three of them had noticed she had come home.

Holly had never told anyone about Mike and El and the stories they shared. Little kids were usually known to not be too good with secrets, but not Holly. She enjoyed listening and collecting as many stories as she could.

Karen pulls El back to the present by commenting on her bright green scrunchie.

"Green?" She said, pointing upwards, "Isn't that a little too – "

"Colorful?" El had supplied, her words a little strong. "Yes. I think my dad would like it."

Karen's smile is tight, but she doesn't offer any other words on the matter, and El remembers another saying from Hopper, *if you don't have anything nice to say then don't say anything at all*, and she thinks maybe that's what Karen is doing as she clears her throat and places a gentle hand on Holly's shoulder.

"El, I wanted to ask you about Mike."

El feels her body freeze up, her fingers beginning to fumble with Sarah's bracelet out of nervousness, and Holly picks up on the action but Karen doesn't. El takes in what the two are wearing as she tries to find the right words.

Karen's wearing a short black dress that cuts off like a skirt at the bottom, and Holly's wearing a black dress with open shoulders and a purple Disney princess necklace. El feels dressed down compared to them in her hand-me-down black dress from Joyce's teenager days, an old, tattered belt of Jonathan's around the waist holding the garment in place on El's small body. Even though Max had given El the green scrunchie, it's all that El has on that is hers.

When El takes too long to answer, Karen continues on, oblivious to the shift in El's demeanor.

"It's just . . . Joyce said you girls were the last people with him and it wouldn't be like him to just up and disappear, even with all that's happened." There's something odd hiding behind Karen's words as she talks, something just out of reach for El, a word she knows but can't grasp.

"Even if all of these crazy things that the news is blabbering on and on about were true, Mike wouldn't be involved in such a thing. Not after—I mean, you girls didn't . . . well, you know, nothing happened, between you three?"

Accusatory, El thinks.

Her words are accusing, and she's . . . accusing El of what exactly? Lying to her? Saying she did something to Mike?

"No." El blurts before her mind can catch up with her mouth, but she can't help it. She would never hurt Mike, ever, and something inside of her had to make sure Karen knew that; even if she didn't believe her.

Karen's hand flexes at her side. "Yes of course, of course. Sorry. I'm being paranoid um," she shakes her head, her sentence trailing off. "El, you would—you would tell me if you knew something about Mike, right?"

El's eyes float over to Holly. Then back to Mrs. Wheeler.

"Yes," and it's only fitting then that Mike's term, their term, comes to mind just then, *friends don't lie*, but El thinks it's okay because her and

Karen have never been friends. She doesn't think they ever will be. Not as long as Mike's gone.

Karen smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes.

She doesn't say anything else either.

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Holly gives El a tight hug around the waist before Karen gently pulls her away and tells El how sorry she is for her loss.

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El thinks she's sorry for a different loss.

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It's September, and the Party's playing Dungeons and Dragons with Will, and though everyone's explaining everything to El, she still doesn't understand.

She's frustrated, because when she would go to Mike for explanations, he would explain something once, and she'd understand.

It makes her feel stupid, having to ask Lucas the same fireball question three times, and question Will about the storytelling twice. It makes her feel useless when her spell falls short because she rolls the dice wrong, and Max's character gets ripped apart by magical wolves.

She loves her friends with all her heart, but Mike just knew. He always just knew, knew her inside and out, and without him here, she feels incomplete, feels like the useless hideaway she was after the demogorgon, after Hopper had sealed her inside a cabin for three hundred and fifty-three days.

She feels so many emotions she can't explain because she doesn't have the vocabulary yet, and it makes her angry, not understanding, not being able to learn because no one can explain the world like Mike could and her anger boils over after Dustin says yet another string of words *she doesn't understand*.

Max begins to translate as soon as she sees the look on El's face, as she'd been doing the entire game, but it's already too late. El stands up so violently that her knee catches the side of the board and the whole thing goes flying, crashing to the floor in a mess as she heads for the door, her head ducked down.

"El!" Max calls, followed by Lucas, while Dustin and Will share concerned looks before bending down and quickly picking up the board and game pieces.

Outside the sky is darkening, grey clouds beginning to circle, the wind picking up speed. El doesn't bother with closing the door behind her, someone will probably just follow her out here anyway, and there she stands, in the dirt driveway of the Byers home, just . . . breathing.

By the time Max and Lucas join her outside, the first few droplets of rain are already starting to fall.

One hits the side of her nose as Lucas' hand falls on her shoulder.

"Hey El," he says, "are you okay?"

El waits a moment before turning around, and then Dustin and Will are standing there too. She shrugs off Lucas's hand and then frowns. "No." When no one interrupts, she continues. "I'm—mad."

Max takes a step towards her and Dustin fidgets in place. "Hop is gone. Mike is gone." Her voice is forceful. "My powers are gone. Everything is gone and *I* am here." Tears are gathering in the corners of her eyes, "I. Am. Here." El takes a step back when Max goes to reach for her. "Why am I," she shakes her head, a raindrop landing in her eyelash, a tear slipping down her cheek. "*Stuck* here?"

"El," Max says, her voice barely above a whisper, but El's emotions

are like the storm forming above, and as the sky opens up with a clap of thunder, so does El.

"Why am I here?" She screams, her voice so loud and so broken. Rain is soaking through everybody's clothes, yet nobody moves. "I want them back!"

Inside, El knows she's acting like she did when her and Hopper got into their fight. A *tantrum* he had called it as she had yelled about *soon*, her heart yearning for Mike, for her friends. How she was acting like a b-r-a-t (she had never forgotten the way he had said it, and she knows that's stupid, but she feels like she can't) and she wonders if she's acting like a brat now.

*(You are like Papa!*

*Really. I'm like that psychotic son of a bitch.*

*Oh. All right. You'll go back in the Lab. One phone call I can make that happen.*

*I hate you!)*

The windows had shattered then. The windows don't shatter now.

Arms wrap around her. The rain is deafening. Lightning flickers across the sky. Her face presses against someone's wet shoulder. "I just want them back," she cries, her voice low and cracking, "why can't they come back?"

Someone hugs her tight and says, "I don't know."

Someone else waits a moment before clearing their throat and saying, "I want them back too."

Someone helps her stand. "Come on El. Let's go inside."

The Party helps El back into the house. Max tells her to take a seat on the couch while Lucas goes to get everybody towels. Will ends up pressed beside her on the couch, his elbow pushing into the armrest but his hand resting on her knee, there if she wants it.

El likes Will.

He never pushes about the things that are bothering her, but he's always there if she needs him. When their nightmares occur on the same nights, and somehow at the same times, they both end up beside each other on the ratty old couch in the Byers' living room, their voices low mumbles as they talk about their dreams and watch some old re-run on the television until they're able to doze back off.

Sometimes, after El's gathered her favorite blanket and teddy bear, she'll stumble upon Joyce sipping on a glass of water in the kitchen on her way to the living room, and she'll sit with her instead. Joyce is quiet those nights, like her brain is working a mile a minute but her mind is elsewhere. El will usually end up falling asleep after she moves her head onto her lap so she can stretch her legs out, and Joyce's presence is just so comforting that it puts El right to sleep.

One time it was Jonathan out there, and he had asked her what she would like to watch even though the bags under his eyes seemed too dark. He hadn't pried about what her dream was about, nor did he talk much at all. But he was there and that was enough for El that night.

El likes the Byers.

She just wishes Hop was there with her too.

Lucas passes out towels and Max covers El's shoulders with one, using another to mess up her hair as she goes to dry it. The boys all dry off as best as they can, and even though Will could just go down the hall and change he chooses not to because he doesn't want to leave El.

In fact, none of the Party wants to leave her just yet, so even though Dustin's due home in an hour he makes a quick call to his mom saying he's just going to wait out the storm, and Lucas does the same with his parents so they don't worry.

There's mostly silence after, the thunder rumbling here and there, the rain hitting the house in troves. Joyce is out with Nancy and Jonathan at dinner, and the old house creaks with every sudden surge of wind, the wood groaning, the windows crackling softly. The

noises are soothing to Will and El, but make Dustin anxious, his leg bobbing up and down, and eventually, he can't take the silence anymore.

"El have you tried to use your powers since . . . you know?"

His words come out rushed and Max shoots him a glare. "Dustin," she warns, and Will looks like he wants to say something too. Dustin stands up and begins pacing, waving his hands around.

"Wait, wait just hear me out first—"

"No!" Max, Lucas and Will shout at the same time, but Dustin ignores them and looks directly at El.

"I'm just—I've been thinking—what if the Mind Flayer just locked away your powers or something? Like they're not gone, they're just stuck behind a locked door and there's some secret combination to unlock them again? Then once we unlock them again we can—"

His words falter. "Um . . . if we can unlock them and get them to come back we can see if—if the Chief and Mike are really uh . . . gone."

El can count the times she's tried to use her powers since the Mind Flayer on one hand. All her attempts have failed, and have made her heart ache painfully—because who is she without her powers?

"I'm just saying that we try a few different things and see if anything happens," Dustin finishes and the rest of the Party instantly disagrees.

"No way is she up for that," Max snaps, and Will agrees.

Lucas is oddly silent, and when he doesn't say anything outright El glances over at him. He meets her eyes wearily. "It's your choice, El." He says quietly.

*You're treating her like some kind of machine when she's not a machine, and I don't want her to die looking for the Flayed when they've obviously vanished off the face of the Earth so can we please just come up with a new plan because I love her and I can't lose her again!*

She would give anything to hear Mike's voice again. She would give anything to hear him say the word love again, to feel his lips pressed firmly against hers, to drift her fingers across the sharp curve of his cheek, to hold his hand and hug him and love him again because she never had enough time to say *I love you* back.

She would give anything . . .

"Okay," she whispers.

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After a few hours of trying, the only thing she ends up with is a painful headache.

Her nose doesn't bleed once.

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She cries for a long time after those few hours trying.

Lucas holds her close, but he's not Mike, or Hopper, and that just makes her cry harder.

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Moving is hard.

Joyce sits everybody down at the kitchen table and tells them that they're moving a week before they actually have to. El and Will spend every second of that last week with the Party and Jonathan does the same with Nancy.

The Byers move from Hawkins, Indiana to Bloomington, Illinois halfway through the month of October. Their new house is bigger, with two floors and a fenced-in backyard, and it sits a little ways from the rush of the main town. El starts high school with all the same classes as Will (as per Joyce's request to the school), and it's a



lot to get used to. Jonathan starts at a college that's almost two hours away and Joyce begins her new job that's located almost conveniently close to where the high school is.

El's first day of school starts with a plate of scrambled eggs and Eggos, extra syrup on both.

"Good morning honey," Joyce says as she walks by, leaning down and kissing the top of El's head as she stands at the bottom of the stairs, Will and Jonathan's plates in hand. "Boys! Breakfast!"

El beams as Joyce turns back to her, gestures towards the stairs and then makes a funny face, causing the younger girl to giggle. Joyce waits a moment more and when there's still no answer she mutters, "Sometimes I *really* wish I had girls instead," before shouting, "you're both going to be late! Will the bus is here!"

In a matter of seconds there's the thump of feet as both boys scramble out of bed (because if the bus is already there for Will then Jonathan is going to miss his first class) and the two of them snicker when they hear a distinct *ouch that was a shelf* echo from Will's room, and Joyce allows the fun for another second before admitting the truth. "Boys I was only kidding, you've both got plenty of time, but get a move on your food is getting cold!"

"*Mom!*" Both boys yell at the same time, causing Joyce and El to laugh some more. Joyce walks back over to the table and places Will's dish next to El and Jonathan's next to hers' before grabbing the orange juice out of the fridge and taking a seat herself.

Fifteen minutes later both boys come barreling down the steps freshly showered and ready to take on the day, though there's identical frowns already on both of their faces. Jonathan takes a seat and takes a huge bite out of his toast at the same time Will shoves his fork into his scrambled eggs and both shoot their mother a look as she sips innocently at her drink.

"What?" She asks and El smirks from behind her napkin.

"I can't believe you pulled that on us our first day," Will says, his tone only half-joking. Jonathan had started college a week prior but by his

expression, he didn't appreciate the joke too much either. Joyce waves a hand.

"Stop it I would never actually let you be late on your first day of school. Anyways, I was just explaining to El how things work once you guys got off the bus."

Will brightens, his earlier mood already gone at the mention of El's first day. He turns towards her, shaking her shoulder excitedly. "I think you're really gonna like school El, especially with how fast you went through those summer school booklets."

Joyce had spent a majority of the rest of the summer teaching El the basics of things for their upcoming school year. Joyce wasn't much of a teacher herself (she often found herself asking Will for help halfway through the lesson) so the books she had bought for El to do in the meantime along with Jonathan and Nancy's tutoring made up for it. El had flown through the books, and it seemed that out of all the subjects she was excelling in math of all things. For some reason, numbers were easy to her, and the rules never changed by much, and she enjoyed simple multiplication like nothing else.

Will seemed excited about this new school, and El was happy to see him excited, but she was nervous. She was so nervous. She still remembers the scar the boys in middle school had given Mike because they thought he was weird, and if the boys in this school thought El was weird, would she just get hurt too? She didn't want to get hurt, and she didn't want to be alone with strangers and she didn't want anyone to pay too much attention to her.

Everyone kept telling her she would be fine but El wasn't so sure.

Joyce's soft voice catches El's attention, "You're going to be perfectly fine, honey, don't you worry." Jonathan and Will agree and El nods, but her hands still uneasily pull at her fall-colored outfit anyway. A piece of string tugs free from the material and winds around her finger, and El wishes it was Mike's pinky instead.

("Pinky promise, it means that a promise has been made and you gotta keep it.")

"So . . . like friends don't lie," El says, uncertainty. Mike nods, grinning wide.

"Yeah but a pinky promise is more . . . definite. Like," and he had held out his pinky then, and El had reached across the bed and his crisscrossed legs and had wrapped her pinky around his, "I pinky promise to never eat all the Eggos."

El had giggled, her mouth curving up, and Mike had smiled some more, hoping she didn't notice that he was nervous or that his hand was clammy. "Now it's your turn," he had said, his eyes never once leaving her face, an emotion she couldn't place scribbled across his features.

El had thought about it for a moment, her mind going through many different words and phrases before settling on something that felt just right. "I pinky promise to never call you a mouth breather."

They both had chuckled at that and El had moved closer, her knee touching his, their hands still connected between them. They were sitting facing each other crisscrossed on Mike's bed, the door open three inches, Karen and Holly making dinner downstairs, the two singing along loudly to the radio.

Mike was growing more anxious by the second, and El could tell but she didn't know why, and just as she was about to ask Mike's pinky had squeezed hers just slightly before he blurted, "I pinky promise to stick with you."

El was silent for too long of a minute and Mike had gotten worried that he had said the wrong thing, or had said it too soon, but then she had leaned forward and kissed him, quick and simple and affectionately. When she had pulled back, their pinkies were still entwined.

"I pinky promise to stick with you too," and instead of an official answer, Mike had leaned forward, and they had kissed again and El had decided that pinky promises were just as nice as promises.)

El's first day of school is going fine until her class just before lunch. She and Will collapse into desks beside each other, laughing quietly

about their science teacher's frizzy hairdo, and for the first time in a while El finally feels happy. She feels free of everything that had been plaguing her since the summer, and she really likes school.

She likes the lockers lining down the hallways, all the colorful clothes the other kids wear and she likes the nice smiles the teachers send her way when she timidly raises her hand and answers a question correctly.

Will beams at her as she jots down notes, and his shoulder bumps against hers all day as they walk from class to class and pick their seats, and El's having so much fun that Will thinks moving might not be so bad after all.

The teacher begins with attendance and when she gets to El's name, things go awry.

"Who has a—El? El Byers?"

El shyly raises her hand, "Here."

The teacher pushes her round-rimmed glasses further up her crooked nose, glancing between El and the seating chart in front of her. She's older with salt and pepper hair tied up in a messy bun, and both Byers siblings already don't like the looks of her. "What kind of a name is El?" The teacher questions in a loud and rude tone and El knows what she has to say but for some reason, the words won't come out.

"Well?" The teacher prods, impatient. "What are you, mute? Spit it out already."

El's heart stutters, and Will intervenes. "It's her middle name." He wants to say more, so much more, like point out how insulting the woman was being, but he can't risk landing himself in detention and leaving El alone for the rest of the day. Not on her first day.

The teacher mutters something under her breath no one can quite hear before shaking her head and moving on, the class a hiss of whispers as their eyes dart from El to Will, and El's hands are beginning to shake from where they hide under the desk. Will

reaches over and attempts to grab one of her hands in support, but El moves away, and she sits silently the rest of class, numbly copying notes from the chalkboard.

As soon as the bell rings El grabs her things and takes off without Will, disappearing down the hallway before he can catch up. It's lunch period so she pushes through the double doors and heads outside, running wherever her feet will take her. As she runs, the breeze follows her, and goosebumps prickles over her exposed skin.

She doesn't even realize when she slips into the Void.

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Will finds her on her knees in the middle of the school's football field, her notebooks and pens scattered around her.

When he touches her shoulder, she gasps and falls into him, but no blood trickles from her nose.

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She swears she had seen them both and she swears that they're both still alive.

She swears, but Will swears that her nose never bled, and if her nose didn't bleed, then her powers weren't ever used.

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It's January.

It hasn't snowed yet, but the weather's been bitter, and the sky's been grey and cloudy for a couple of days now. Joyce swears it's going to snow by the weeks' end but all the kids doubt her, even if by Thursday the weather report seems to be in Joyce's favor.

The house grows quieter and quieter as everyone shuffles in and out,

and a lot of times El finds herself to be the only one home when Will stays after for an extra art class or two. The bus ride home from school is almost thirty minutes, but El doesn't mind.

She's the last stop since their house is technically out of town, even though it's only five minutes' worth, and the bus driver—a nice older lady who reminds El of Joyce with her mannerisms—always turns the radio on after the obnoxious boy before El gets off and then it's just the hits and the scenery passing by out the window and it's peaceful in a way El never could've predicted.

Of course she'd rather be riding with the Party, but they weren't there and Joyce was a little weary with letting Will use his bike, and El didn't have a bike yet, so it was the bus for now.

El watches out the foggy window as the bus slows to a stop in front of the Byers home, and she gathers her bag before unbuckling her seat belt and making her way to the front of the bus.

"Have a good day sweetie," the bus driver says as the double doors pop open with a hiss.

"Thank you Ms. Daphne, you too."

As El trudges up to the front door, with her own jacket and Will's thrown over her shivering shoulders, a single white flake lands on her nose. She jumps, not expecting it, and then turns around watching as more snowflakes slowly begin their descent from the stormy sky above.

A grin splits across her face as she watches the snowflakes fall, captivated. She might not like the cold but she loves snowflakes. They're so pretty and carefree . . .

El watches the snowflakes until the tips of her fingers go numb and then decides to go inside, pulling out her house key and unlocking the door.

The house is almost as cold as outside and El groans quietly as she locks the door behind her before making a beeline for the heater and turning it on—usually Jonathan was home around lunchtime and he

turned it on before he left again so that the house would be warmed up when Will and El got home, but he had to make up a test so he hadn't been home yet. She smiles as the heater starts to fill the house with warmth and strips out of her two jackets and shucks off her shoes before heading upstairs so that she can leave her bag in her room.

The house is toasty by the time she's settled on the living room couch with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and last night's taped soap opera, and she's halfway through her sandwich when her mind drifts.

She had seen them.

She had seen Mike and Hopper and she didn't know how, but she knew they were still alive. One second she was in the Void, and the next she was in a room with iron bars and one lightbulb hanging from the ceiling swinging back and forth.

There was a sharp pain in her head and a throbbing in one of her knees. There was old blood splattered on the cement walls and fresh blood on the ground. The room was empty, but there was noise everywhere – bloodcurdling screams and pained yells and raspy cries.

The door leading into the room had slammed open behind her and she had jumped and whipped around just in time to see Hopper being dragged in by the armpits by two men with tan suits. He was mumbling something under his breath as his head lolled from side to side, and El had gone to reach out for him, his name on her lips, and just as her hand had slipped through his shoulder, she had seen a flash of black hair from the hallway, and then she was falling into Will's open arms.

She had seen them, and she had lost them.

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december 24th, 1986

9:21 pm

The phone rings as they're watching Miami Vice together.

Joyce stands to get it as El snuggles further into the couch pillow she has curled in her arms, Will shifting into a more comfortable position beside her, his head half-leaning on her shoulder.

"Hello?"

Joyce has their back turned to them, and the television volume is up loud so no one can really hear what she's saying or who's on the other line. Jonathan glances over at the same time his mom looks back towards her kids, and there's sharp, sudden panic scribbled across her face, enough there to make his stomach immediately drop and his hand clutch at the fabric of the couch's armrest.

She hides her face again before he can question her, and the next thirty seconds consist of Jonathan apprehensively looking between the television and Joyce's back.

*Click!*

Jonathan almost jumps up when Joyce finally hooks the phone back into the receiver, but she's disappeared into the kitchen before he can. He glances worriedly at Will and El beside him, their focus still entirely on the show, and he wants to go to his mom and ask what's wrong, but he also doesn't want to alarm the teens, so instead he sits and waits.

Joyce reappears in the living room less than a minute later, all of their winter coats bundled in her arms. The car keys are hanging halfway out of her pants pocket. Jonathan scrambles for the remote and silences the show.

"Mom?" He asks, having trouble keeping the waver out of his tone. "What's going on? What's wrong?" Joyce's eyes are wet, and her cheeks are red. She's pulled her hair into a tight ponytail in the time she's been gone and Jonathan swears he sees her bottom lip quiver at one point. El sits up, couch pillow still held tight. Will straightens,



searching for one of El's hands.

It seems like forever before Joyce can finally get the words out.

"We have to go back to Hawkins."

Her voice is shaky, and she would almost look silly standing there with four puffy coats nearly twice the size of her, but the tension in the room is so thick that silly seems like a faraway word in a faraway world.

"What? Why? Did something happen?"

Joyce looks from Jonathan to Will and finally, to El. Her hand creases the material of the biggest of the four coats—the one that used to be Hopper's, the one she's used all winter. Her hand squeezes the coat tighter and tighter until it's almost balled in her fist, and then she says two words that El thought she'd never hear.

"They're alive."

The silence that comes after is loud. It's so loud that El's not quite sure why they call it silence. Joyce's lips are moving but El can't hear her, not yet, because it's so loud, and it's not until Will's hand falls on her shoulder that Joyce's voice reaches her again.

"They're at the Wheelers' house, and Karen said—Karen said—"

Joyce's voice catches, and then Jonathan's at her side, gently taking the coats from her and handing them out. Joyce looks away for a moment and then her eyes find El's again. Something unspoken passes between them, relief maybe, or something more, but El understands. It's relieving and terrifying all at once. It's overwhelming.

It's uncertain.

"El," Will whispers, tugging gently at her arm, urging her to let him help her with her jacket, and when El blinks and looks over at him, he's already ready, shoes and all. Jonathan's helping Joyce with her own coat and El nods slightly as Will offers a sleeve to her, sliding her arm in.

They're in the car by the time the clock strikes nine-thirty.

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The snow looks like burly hands reaching for her through the smudged backseat window, and El shifts uneasily after a jostling bump. Will's hip is pressing into hers, and any other time she'd swat at his shoulder and playfully tell him to *move over mouth breather* but it's comforting in a way it never usually is.

The backseat is small, so Will has to sit on a slight angle to fit and El's foot is stuck somewhere between the door and front seat. Per Will's request a few miles earlier, the radio is on some random station neither of them knows because they're getting farther and farther from Bloomington, and it's the only noise besides the wind howling and pushing against the windows every once in a while.

No one knows what to say, and no one knows exactly what they're driving into besides a snowstorm, and no one wants to voice their fears out loud.

Will feels El move and readjusts himself so that his shoulder is closer for her to reach. She whispers a barely audible, "Thanks," his way before scooching closer, as far away from the window as she can get, and resting her head on his shoulder. Will's quiet for a long time.

"They're okay, El." She hears him exhale. "They have to be."

A new song starts on the radio as Joyce turns onto a new stretch of open highway.

El closes her eyes.

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*I just, like, I've never felt like this, you know, with anyone before and you know, they do say it makes you crazy—*

*What makes you crazy?*

*You—You never heard that term? You know, that phrase, like, "blank makes you crazy" like the word?*

*Girlfriends?*

*No, no, no, not—not girlfriends.*

*Boyfriends.*

*No, no, no, not boyfriends either!*

*It's like, it's like a feeling . . .*

*A feeling . . .*

*Like, old people say it to each other sometimes.*

*Old people?*

*What I wanna say is that I just . . . I know that I . . .*

*"El."*

She jumps awake, nearly knocking into Will who moves back just in time. She looks around wildly, still disorientated from her dream and when she glances out the window, she realizes they've stopped. She looks back to Will and he offers her a small smile. "We're here."

El can't describe how she feels when he says those words, and it's almost like a breath of fresh air, almost like she can't breathe all at once, and the feeling doesn't go away until Joyce reaches back and rests her hand on El's knee. Joyce's eyes meet hers, and she looks worried, looks as worried as El feels when she says, "Are you ready, honey?"

El doesn't think she'll be able to get any words out so she just nods and Joyce smiles the best she can before she and Jonathan open their doors. Will and El look at each other one last time before turning and doing the same, and a heavy gust of snowy wind slams into El as she clambers out of the vehicle.

She pulls her coat tighter and Joyce grabs her hand as they make their way up the pathway to the Wheelers' front door, Jonathan and Will trailing behind them. The snow is still falling in a violent flurry, the huge flakes sticking to everybody's hair and clinging to their winter coats, and as they reach the front door Joyce squeezes El's hand, and El thinks she's trying to reassure the both of them that everything's going to be alright as she uses her other hand and knocks one, two, three, four times on the door.

They only have to wait out in the blistering cold for a few seconds longer before Ted Wheeler—with a few new wrinkles around his eyes—answers the door. He doesn't say anything as he moves to the side so they can come in, and he slams the door behind them after they're all inside.

The warmth of the house seeps into El's bones the same way it always did whenever she'd come to visit Mike in the summer, and it comforts her, being back here, in the first house she had called home.

Ted stands awkwardly next to Joyce as the four of them slowly remove their coats, and he only speaks up when Holly suddenly appears at the top of the staircase, Nancy standing behind her. "El!" Holly yells in excitement, running down the steps two at a time. She reaches the last step and then jumps into El's awaiting arms, hugging her tightly, and El feels tears prick at her eyes.

She missed Holly. She missed Holly a lot.

"I missed you El," Holly mumbles into her shoulder, and El's breathless laugh is a little watery in tone.

"I missed you too."

Jonathan and Nancy embrace on the last step and Ted clears his throat, catching everybody's attention. "Holly, why don't you go and find yourself a bedtime snack?"

"Okay!"

Holly reluctantly lets go of El, and she smiles as the little girl runs towards the kitchen. Ted sighs as he remembers how sneaky his

daughter can be. "Nothing sugary!" He warns, to which they can hear Holly giggle at. Ted's face turns solemn and El can see Nancy intertwine her fingers with Jonathan's out of the corner of her eye.

"Um," He starts hesitantly, his voice low, and he sounds so unlike Ted Wheeler that it causes El's stomach to turn and twist uneasily. "Jim is—he's upstairs in the guest bedroom. Michael's down in the basement, Karen's down there with him right now—"

"What happened? Where were they? Where did they come from?" Joyce is quiet with her questions, worried about Holly, El's sure. Just the mention of Mike's name, just knowing that he's here in the house alive and breathing is enough to make her heart stumble.

Ted waves a hand at Joyce's questioning. "We don't know any details and they're both refusing to go to the hospital. They just . . . we were watching a movie with Holly and then we heard knocking at the door and it didn't stop just kept coming, they just kept knocking, so I went to the door and—and there they were. Covered in snow, shivering, bloody."

El's mouth moves without her realizing it. "Bloody?"

Ted looks over at her and the look in his eyes is foreign. Ted Wheeler was a lot of things. He wasn't the best father and El had witnessed those times a lot. But right now in this moment, he looked sad, and worried, and afraid. He doesn't answer her directly.

"It took Karen a while to convince them that a shower would help warm them up and clean them up. Eventually, they both got one but . . ."

He trails off but it looks like he wants to say more.

His mouth opens a closes a few times, and it's like he can't find the words.

Joyce saves him from having to.

"Can we see them?"

Ted nods just as Holly rounds the corner, "Yeah. Yeah. Jim's been—"

he's been asking for you."

Joyce nods and looks between her kids before her eyes land on El.

"El, honey, can I just have a minute alone with him?" El nods, understanding, and Joyce smiles before making her way up the stairs, and El swears she'd take them two at a time like Holly had if she could. As Joyce disappears from view, Holly goes to stand beside El but Ted gently catches her arm.

"Come on now, it's time for bed."

"Dad!" Holly whines but he just shakes his head causing Holly to pout and cross her arms.

"Holly, what if Jonathan and I came up and read you a bedtime story?" Nancy offers, and Holly's face lights up with a smile. Nancy can't help but smile too. "We'll be up soon." She promises as Ted guides Holly towards the stairs.

"You better!" She says as she runs up the stairs, Ted following slowly behind.

El watches them until she can't see Holly anymore, and then Nancy's wrapping her in a hug.

"How are you holding up?" Nancy whispers and El just wants to cry. She just wants to see them and know that they're actually there and alive and she must accidentally say that out loud because the next thing El knows is that Nancy is bringing her face to face with the closed bedroom door of the guest room.

"You ready?" Nancy asks, and El doesn't even realize that she's holding her hand until she squeezes hers, and she can feel Jonathan and Will behind her too.

El looks over at Nancy, breathes out, and says, "Yes."

The door creaks as it opens.

Joyce is sitting on the corner of the bed and El can see she has one of his calloused hands clutched in both of hers, and there's tears falling

down both her cheeks, and tears falling down both of Hopper's. And then she sees him, and he sees her.

"El," he mumbles, shocked and numb and not believing that she's actually there.

"El." He says again, slightly louder, and El lets go of Nancy's hand and runs. She plows into him even though she promised herself she wouldn't and he grunts from the impact but wraps his arms around her nonetheless, pressing his lips to the top of her head before pulling her closer and mumbling her name again.

El breaks and sobs into his chest, both of her hands grasping at the back of his shirt, pulling the material taut, and he laughs softly, his arms pulling her even closer, engulfing her, his beard long and scratchy as it tickles her cheek.

"I love you kid," he mumbles as he presses another kiss to the top of her head, "I love you so much."

"I love you too," she whispers, and he laughs quietly, the sound shaking his whole body, and El doesn't know how she's survived all this time without him. He's her family. And as Will, Jonathan and Joyce all suddenly join in for a group hug, El knows that they're her family too. El knows right here, surrounded by people she loves, that this is where she belongs.

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El doesn't want to leave Hopper but there's still a hole in her heart where Mike used to be so she promises she'll be back before heading downstairs and moving towards the basement's closed door.

Karen opens it just as she reaches for the golden knob.

She doesn't seem surprised to see El sneaking off to go and see Mike before anyone else. She only smiles and squeezes her shoulder as she passes her, and then heads upstairs with everyone else. El stares down the rickety basement steps, her heart beating fast. She can see the flicker of the television light as it flashes against the wall in

-muted colors, and she can hear the hum of people talking in whatever sitcom he has on.

She closes her eyes and counts to three before taking the first step.

Then another, and another.

She pulls the door shut behind her, careful that it doesn't slam, and by the time she reaches the bottom of the steps, her heart is nearly bursting out of her chest. Mike hasn't noticed her yet and El watches his chest move up and down as he watches TV, the blanket pulled up to his shoulders, his body still too long for the couch, his feet dangling well over the oversized armrest.

His hair is still slightly wet from the shower, some locks half-curved and his hands are fidgeting under the blanket. There's a black and blue welt under his left eye, nearly the size of his cheek, and there's a bunch of small half-healed scrapes across the right side of his jaw. His nose looks just a bit off—like it was broken and set haphazardly—and there's something that looks like a round burn mark towards the underside of his chin.

El can't wait any longer.

"Mike."

The tears are already starting again, sliding down her cheeks, and she can see Mike flinch from under the blanket at the sound of her voice, and then freeze.

El takes another step forward. Slowly, Mike turns his head, and then he's struggling to his feet. She makes it to the side of the couch at the same time he makes it to his feet, and then he's crashing into her. "Mike," she half-sobs as he wraps his arms around her back, and she can feel his shoulders shaking and hear his sniffles as he tightens his hold.

"El," he finally says, his voice raspy and exhausted and *his*, "Oh El, I've—I've—"

His voice cuts off, "I've missed you," and his words are almost hidden by his sudden sob. "It was hell, El." His voice shakes and she can hear



the anger, but he's so exhausted that his words don't hold any actual weight to them. "It was *shit*," he cries hoarsely, holding her tighter, and El pulls back so she can see his face.

She reaches a hand up so she can wipe away some of his tears with the pad of her thumb, and then her forehead softly falls against his. "It was all such shit," he says again, shaking his head just barely, squeezing his eyes shut and unable to get the tears to stop.

Now that she's close enough she can see that there's a large white bandage peeking out from under his shirt and as he lifts his hands to clutch at both her shoulders that his hands are bruised nearly purple. "Mike," she murmurs, her own hands interlocking on the back of his neck, their faces so close to each other, their tears still fresh.

Mike opens his eyes at the sound of his name and El gives him a tearful smile.

She would give anything to say it back.

"I love you."

He looks shocked, but only for a second.

Then he huffs out a short, disbelieving laugh. His eyes shine.

"I love you too," he whispers and then he closes the distance between them. The kiss is like a breath of air after being underwater, like a fresh breeze after a storm. He's home, and she's no longer drifting along looking for a new one. They pull apart after a minute, both of them slightly out of breath, and then El is sliding her thumb down the welt on his cheek.

He winces even though her touch is feather-light, and anger for whoever did this to him makes her blood suddenly boil. "Who did this?"

Mike reaches a hand up and pulls hers away. He pulls her over to the couch and she helps him take a seat, and she ends up pressed against his side, her head resting against his chest. One of his arms is wrapped around her and their hands stay locked together on his lap.

"Where were you?" El asks quietly, and Mike exhales. His whole body shakes with the action, and El moves closer, tilting her head up so she can see his face.

"We were in some state. I don't remember where, just that Hopper told me we had to keep going if we wanted to get home." He's quiet for a moment. "The Russians took us. They fucking suck."

El smiles, though it's tight and doesn't reach her eyes.

He doesn't offer any other information, and El doesn't prod. She tells him she loves him during a commercial break, and he leans down and kisses her and says it back. El doesn't think she'll ever hear those words enough.

She sees more scars and marks dotting his arms and Mike squeezes her hand when he catches her staring for too long. They lay there long enough that they fall asleep wrapped around each other, El's head lolling towards the middle of Mike's chest and his arm wound tightly around her, the blanket over their legs but already falling off.

It's late in the night when Holly sneaks down to the basement. She tiptoes towards the two teens holding onto each other for dear life and pokes at El's hand until she blinks groggily.

"Holly," she mumbles, half-awake, "what's wrong?"

Mike stirs at El's worried voice, slurring his own version of the words that sound nothing like them. His grip tightens on El almost subconsciously as he says it, and Holly yawns and rubs at one eye, Tiger clasped tightly in the other.

"Can I sleep down here?" She whispers, and El gives her what she hopes is a smile in her half-asleep state. She gently pushes at Mike's shoulder to get him to move, and he readjusts, moving to try and make some room, but it still isn't enough to fit little Holly. El struggles to think of a solution but then Holly's already suggesting one. "Can we sleep in the blanket fort?"

El's eyes drift over to the blanket fort that's been reassembled in the corner of the room, probably by Holly and Nancy, and she thinks that

Holly couldn't have suggested anything better. It was perfect. El turns to Mike.

"Mike," she says, pulling at his hand, "come on."

He doesn't answer but he does allow her to carefully pull him off the couch and guide him over to the fort, telling him to watch his head as she hands him a pillow and he climbs in first. El has Holly follow him, and then she goes last, flipping the sheet down behind her.

Holly's already curled into Mike's chest, Tiger pushed down by her stomach, and El settles in beside her, pulling a quilt over all three of them and then laying down on the squishy pillow she had snagged for herself. Holly's left side is against El's right and Mike's arm is slung protectively over his baby sister, his fingers reaching for El.

She takes his hand as she settles and he squeezes her fingers once to let her know that he's there.

She squeezes his fingers once to let him know that she's there too.

They doze off in the pillow fort together, finally home.